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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001295

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08-05-14

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SUBJECT: In political move, President resigns from leadership position in governing alliance

Refs: (A) Colombo 1243, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: President Kumaratunga resigned as leader of her government United People's Freedom Alliance on August 4. Government interlocutors officially described the resignation as expected, adding that it would allow the President more time to focus on the peace process. Her departure from the leadership position comes after party officials claim they were misquoted on August 3, saying she had reversed her position to discuss the Tigers' interim administration proposals at peace talks. While her August 4 resignation does not imperil the government, it likely represents internal alliance turmoil. The President may feel this is her only option for distancing herself from the infighting. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) PRESIDENT RESIGNS AS ALLIANCE LEADER: On August 4, President Chandrika Kumaratunga abruptly resigned from her post as leader of the governing United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA). According to several party sources, the move did not signal a change in government or a weakening of the alliance. A government press statement explained that the President had resigned her position "due to pressure of work." Susil Premajayantha, Minister of Power and Energy told poloff August 5 the President wanted to engage more on the peace process and development projects for the country.

3. (C) RESIGNATION WAS EXPECTED: Premajayantha said the President had only accepted a UPFA executive council position "for the time being" when the alliance was formed in January 2004. (The UPFA executive council is comprised of party leaders of the major alliance parties: the President's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party "SLFP," the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna "JVP," the Muslim-based National Unity Alliance "NUA" and the left-wing Mahajana Eksath Peramuna "MEP.") Now the time had come, Susil said, for another SLFP member to assume the role. The President remains the leader of the SLFP and her party is scheduled to meet late August 5 to nominate someone to replace her on the UPFA Executive Council. Some reports have suggested that Kumaratunga's brother, Tourism Minister Anura Bandaranaike, could be tapped as her replacement. Premajayantha also highlighted the fact that Tilvin Silva, the General Secretary of the JVP, was not a member of the alliance executive council, either.

4. (C) The UPFA executive council met on August 2. The incident that followed may have led to the President's decision to resign her leadership position. Media outlets reported on August 3 that at the Council meeting the President had "backtracked" on her promise to discuss the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) proposal at peace negotiations. In the firestorm that ensued, the SLFP spokesman Maithripala Sirisena publicly issued a denial of comments that the President had changed her negotiating position. The state-owned DAILY NEWS apologized for conveying an incorrect interpretation of the government's stance on peace negotiations and printed a clarification from the GSL.

5. (C) COMMENT: While her August 4 resignation does not imperil the government, it likely represents internal alliance turmoil. Unofficially, many commentators feel that the JVP is becoming increasingly obstinate and the President is having a difficult time keeping them in line. Since the JVP is in her government, she can not attack them publicly and she may feel that resigning is her only option for distancing herself from the infighting. This type of infighting does not bode well for a smooth policy process and, indeed, for the survival of this unwieldy coalition government. END COMMENT.

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